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## “White World, Not a Sound” Paternal Spaces in Samuel Beckett’s *Embers*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims at the interpretation of the father as an empty figure of authority in Samuel Beckett’s radio play entitled *Embers*. Through the close-reading of this play and the analysis of the relations between the protagonist and the two feminine characters, Ada and Addie, it demonstrates how the father figure coincides with the classical impasse of Beckett’s *oeuvre*: the subject unable to manifest itself. Due to that fact, the father is presented in the constant process of wearing his authorial space out. It is eventually demonstrated that in *Embers* the subject is coerced to balance between its self-deconstruction and the paternal violence: its focus on its own materiality results in the collapse of language, whereas overt attention on the linguistic cognition puts forward the logic of remnants resisting father’s orders, be it in the form of sound collage, or material element immune to symbolisation.

**KEY WORDS:** daughter, paternal violence, physicality, Samuel Beckett, the real

### Wearing the Father Out

Dead fathers are never entirely absent. This realisation – perhaps naïve and blatantly obvious from the perspective of the contemporary theory – founds the originary force that fans Samuel Beckett’s *Embers*, finished in 1957. On the one hand, this radio play, telling the story of desolate Henry and his bitter relationships, contributes to Beckett’s lifelong artistic project of exploring the collapse of subject as revealed in language. On the other – it remains curiously extraordinary, since it employs radio and its specificities (a medium later abandoned by Beckett) and refers abundantly to paternal tropes (neglected in his further works). In the opening monologue, Henry – the protagonist of this piece – admits:

Henry: [...] Who is beside me now? [Pause.] An old man, blind and foolish. [Pause.] My father, back from the dead, to be with me. [Pause.] As if he hadn't died. [Pause.] No, simply back from the dead, to be with me, in this strange place. [Pause.] Can he hear me? [Pause.] Yes, he must hear me. [Pause.] To answer me? [Pause.] No, he doesn't answer me. [Pause.] Just be with me.

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Even though this short passage poses Henry's father as a transcendent entity, who is addressable yet incapable to respond, the work itself quickly revises the relation of the two characters. In a different sequence, Ada – Henry's spectral companion – notices:

Ada: I suppose you have worn him out. [Pause.] You wore him out living and now you are wearing him out dead. [Pause.]

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For Ada, even Henry's posture and the habit to stare motionlessly at the sea directly demonstrate that he is a transfiguration of his own father, who has been repeating the very same things in her memory. When Henry in response represses the fact that she has actually met his father, Ada's detailed description leaves it beyond the shadow of doubt, forcing Henry to agree with her. However, bearing in mind how diligently does Beckett choose the names of his protagonists and play with the language of his metaphors, the way in which Ada puts forward her diagnosis – if we may call it that way – and its repetition deserve a further enquiry. One of the reasons is that one can never be certain whether the father in *Embers* is indeed "he," or rather "it." All in all, Ada's disclosure of Henry's habits as transfigurations of his father's ones allows one to perceive the paternal figure literally as an "outfit" that – due to the excessive exploitation – has been worn out.

If one dares follow this interpretative intuition, he or she has to admit that Henry's persistent and excessive staging of his father dispossesses the protagonist of the paternal instance of authority. Similarly to Jacques Lacan's teachings, the father happens to be empty and devoid of a social context; since after Ada's finding the world of *Embers* – predominantly mediated by Henry's stories – remains undamaged, what seems to lie beneath the father's worn out image is yet another fatherly function. In fact, working through Henry's father's departure – so intensively longed for throughout the play and never entirely achieved – has been predestined to fail from the very beginning, for the father figure constantly depriving Henry of the solid subjectivity is Henry himself. This realisation is even amplified if one confronts it with Jonathan Kalb's view on *Embers* as a transitory work in Beckett's *oeuvre*. Kalb notes that it inaugurates the sequence of works combining the usage of the possibilities given by the medium which stages the work (in this case radio) and the idea of a centrally placed

speaking protagonist under the duress of ceaseless talking (129–130). Beckett's pantheon of miserable creatures therefore gains a symbolic dimension, according to which the protagonists can operate both on the level of representation (plot) and presentation (media), locating themselves as external points of authority and internal objects subdued to it. I will return to this point further on in this text.

With regard to the strategy of “wearing the father out” as a way of exposing and consolidating paternal authority, this paper aims at a converse process. Specifically, I will endeavour to show the manner in which *Embers* “wears the paternal authority out” and exposes it to the *real* that lies beyond the latter, by means of staging and embodying different paternal relations.<sup>1</sup> In the first part of my paper, I intend to re-think Henry's relation to Ada. Arguing that their sexual intercourse inaugurates the repression of her body, I will show how Henry attempts to protect himself from it by demonstrating his fatherly and linguistic power over matter. The more he does it, the more his authority seems to fade nonetheless. Subsequently, I will proceed to analyse his relationship with Addie, who is not represented by the lack, but rather the sonic excess. I will show how – through her disobedience against two masters – she punctures the paternal authority and immunises herself to its violence. Finally, following the summing up of both female figures and their disruptive effects on Henry, I will introduce the ominous trope of the sea, which is metonymic to the transmitting medium. It turns out to induce the impossibility of paternal supremacy and eventually presuppose its failure with regard to Ada and Addie.

## Not to Touch the Earth

By all means is Kalb's thesis inspired by the brilliantly constructed reality of *Embers*, wherein Henry, aside of being its storyteller, embodies the operator of the broadcasting medium staging the play; after all, he begins his opening monologue with “On” (BECKETT, *Embers* 253).<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the stage of transmission is set with the gesture of turning the radio on, but on the other – it becomes implied that all of the upcoming events will be rooted in “moving on,” and will not necessarily reach a halting point in the end.<sup>3</sup> Paul Lawley suggests

<sup>1</sup> Following the inspiring juxtaposition provided by Steven Connor, throughout this essay I will play on the homonymy of the *real*, in its Lacanian sense, and the *reel* (CONNOR 89).

<sup>2</sup> A similar technique is employed for instance in *Waiting for Godot*, *Not I* or *Endgame*, whose opening lines simultaneously set the stage and foresee the resolution of the plot.

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *Embers* might be treated as a direct predecessor of *The Unnamable* and *Not I*.

that all characters in *Embers*, including Henry, may actually serve as "father-surrogates" (LAWLEY). Following Lawley's argument, it may be claimed, after Alain Robbe-Grillet, that Henry happens to be the "existence by proxy" of the creator who is obliged to create himself" and the "provisional being" (Robbe-Grillet qtd. in LAWLEY). If that is the case, then *Embers* would boil down to one, linear voice that in the course of its own narration incarnates a variety of heroes and figures – its "vice-existers," to use the phrase from *The Unnamable* (BECKETT 309) – although it reaches the desirable comfort in none of them. At the same time, aside of transporting us from one embodiment to another, paternal authority refers to the realm outside of *Embers*, since its hosts can only be "provisional" or "proxy." The complex figure of Henry thus seems to emerge not only as a storyteller *inside* the play, but also – and perhaps predominantly – as the storyteller *of Embers*.

As I am convinced, this split constitutes the impasse of Henry's subjectivity. On the one hand, he is a visitor – he exists *in* language and *through* language, but at the same time he is deprived of physicality (since the radio reduces perception solely to the audial one). On the other hand, he is capable of articulating performatives that activate zones outside of the plot itself. In that sense, his position is shifted from merely a visitor into a quasi-host, who, even though relying on a certain convention and not genuine transgression of the medial borders, disturbs the linearity and the classical form of the radio play. Still, this act of going beyond the first formal stratum of *Embers* does not provide him with a suitable body; he is inscribed on the magnetic tape nonetheless.<sup>4</sup> The way in which the aforementioned lack of body, duress of talking, and inhabitation of the edges of two realms intertwine results in the returning performative "Hooves":

Henry: [...] Hooves! [Pause.] Hooves! [Sound of hooves walking on hard road. They die rapidly away. Pause.] Again! [Hooves as before. Pause. Excitedly] Train it to mark time! Shoe it with steel and tie it up in the yard, have it stamp all day! [Pause.] A ten-ton mammoth back from the dead, shoe it with steel and have it tramp the world down! Listen to it! [Pause.]

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This passage marks Henry's insatiability. The lack of his own body cannot be mitigated by the absolute control over the audial image of shoed hooves stomping the ground. Even though this sound reverberates according to Henry's will,

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that we still can hear Henry's steps – which to a certain degree opposes my interpretation. Yet, and this should also be emphasised, his steps indicate the linear flow of the story. In this sense, they mark the constant movement with regard to the duress of talking and inability of pronouncing one's "I," commenced by the audial/kinetic performative "On": "Turn on the radio" and "Move on" / "Keep on." The physicality which interests me here would rather indicate *going beyond* this impasse, and not merely *going within* it.

it is deprived of the actual hooves that have caused it. A greater excess is thus demanded; Henry resurrects an extinct “ten-ton mammoth,” posed as a harbinger of the unavoidable apocalypse. As a creature it is supposed to fulfil Henry’s desire of excessive tumbling noise and its connection to the physicality, whereas its presence – unlike that of hooves – is guaranteed by the place the mammoth occupies in the past: the realm of the dead. The link joining together the cataclysm and physicality as objects of yearning manifests itself in the weird idea of “training” the mammoth “to mark time.” It hence covers the re-introduction of the possibility of closure into the ceaseless duress initiated (or sustained) via the performative “On”: both as the static image of marking time and the promise of the ultimate event. Nevertheless, “hooves” exist only on the record; as they are once and for all devoid of their bodily and material counterparts, their promise of cataclysm inevitably postpones the prophesised event, for it remains unable to affect the matrix of the tape. One might claim that their standstill remains their greatest flaw.

The realisation of the matter that is capable of destroying matter may be grounded in a source different than the subjective split theorised above. Let us focus on Ada, who plays on the word “dad,” just like Addie – on “daddy” (LAWLEY). In the beginning of the middle sequence of the radio play, we encounter such an event:

Henry: [...] Are you going to sit down beside me?

Ada: Yes. [*No sound as she sits.*] Like that? [*Pause.*] Or do you prefer like that? [*Pause.*] You don’t care. [*Pause.*]

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Further on, Ada addresses Henry:

Ada: Don’t stand there gaping. Sit down. [*Pause. Shingle as he sits.*] On the shawl. [*Pause.*] Are you afraid we might touch? [*Pause.*] Henry.

Henry: Yes.

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Since we cannot hear Ada’s body as she sits down, in contrast to shingle made by Henry’s one, it does not exist in the sonic realm of *Embers*. Yet, if indeed *Embers* projects one of Henry’s stories, then Ada is purposely deprived of her corporeality. This suspicion followed by the alleged fear of being touched poses a double function of Ada’s dematerialisation. Partially, it can be understood as the fear of encountering the other that cannot be neutralised within Henry’s narration. Yet, simultaneously, this might be a defensive mechanism prohibiting her to restore, in a sense, her body back, by not acknowledging its presence. No matter whether the lack of the body serves as a direct threat to Henry’s integrity or the protection from a different danger, it sheds a new light on his obsession with

hooves. In order to discard his fear Henry has to legitimate his own authority over material and physical phenomena, and express his familiarity with them. Interestingly enough, this juxtaposition demands to be completed; if hooves and the mammoth are linked with the end of the world, then Ada's body has to be considered as its origin.

The chiasm presented above directs us to Henry and Ada's sexual intercourse, which took place twenty years earlier, as the director's notes inform us, and is the only moment in the whole radio play in which her corporeality is noted. This forced act is implied by Henry's repetitive "Darling!" (260) intertwined with Ada's repetitive "Don't!" (260). Thereafter, this flashback is interrupted by the sudden roar of the sea. The staging of this coerced intercourse gains in importance if one recalls the significant role Addie – their daughter – plays in *Embers*. Before we proceed to the wider analysis of her figure, let us only emphasise Henry's ambivalence towards her. In one place, he calls her: "Horrid little creature, wish to God we'd never had her [...]" (256), while on the other he calmly admits:

Henry: It took us a long time to have her. [*Pause.*] Years we kept hammering away at it. [*Pause.*] But we did it in the end. [*Pause. Sigh.*] We had her in the end.

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Addie – who in *Embers* functions as a figure of resistance to the father's authority – seems to be the reason for depriving Ada of her body. Biologically, Addie is directly connected with her mother; however, as her mother's and her own name signify, both women are originally derived from the father figure of Henry. Addie, who does not follow Henry's expectations and orders, makes her father reconsider Ada's body as the source of something unleashed and beyond his control. Since Addie is both "expected" and "horrid," the disappointment at Ada is implied, which makes touching her unacceptable for Henry. Hence, he separates Ada from himself, which initially takes form of the aforementioned fear and her ethereality within his story, while later – of disconnecting her from the paternal function.<sup>5</sup> This in turn leads to her disintegration within the symbolic and reduction to the passive object ("Henry: '[...] You needn't speak. Just listen. Not even. Be with me.'" (263)). Eventually, the final quotation – covering speaking to Ada in the same manner that Henry's father is addressed in the beginning of the play – suggests that Ada has been absolutely dominated by language.

<sup>5</sup> "Henry: 'I can't remember if he [the father] met you. [...] I'm sorry, I have forgotten almost everything connected with you'" (262).



## One Cannot Serve Two Masters

The struggle between Ada and Henry, read as a space of the subject trying to construct itself and preserve its unity, connotes the strategy governing Beckett's whole *oeuvre*. Alain Badiou describes it as follows:

The fictional set-up that deals with the closure of the cogito is the one that structures the best-known part of Beckett's work. This is the set-up of the motionless voice – *a voice put under house arrest* by a body [*qu'un corps assigne à résidence*]. This body is mutilated and held captive, reduced to being no more than the fixed localisation of the voice. It is in chains, tied to a hospital bed, or stuck in a jar that advertises a restaurant opposite the slaughterhouse. This "I" is doubly closed: in the fixity of the body and in the persistence of a voice with neither answer nor echo, it endlessly persists in trying to find the path of its own identification.

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Badiou's insightful observation perfectly fits the element analysed in the previous section. *Embers* provides a space for the wandering voice that replicates and incorporates, rejects and affirms, creates and strives for destruction in order to reach a halting point under the singular "I." The difference, however, lies in the relation to the body. While Badiou refers mostly to the mutilated bodies known from Beckett's prose, in *Embers* one encounters the various levels of deprivation of corporeality, stemming directly from the fact that in the radio play the body can be but dispersed: to its linguistic appropriation, to its mediation through the sound effects, to its imprint on the recorded tape. The body is thus not so much mutilated as in a process of on-going disintegration. Yet, at the same time, these shifting bodily borders make the paternal function tremble; via exercising and exploiting its naming abilities these phenomena reach the places where the father's linguistic authority becomes tainted with the undecidable.

The intriguing redefinition allies Badiou's remark with the revolutionary reading of his main theoretical adversary, Gilles Deleuze, under a common banner. In the preface to *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze writes that "Beckett spoke of 'drilling holes' in language in order to see or hear 'what was lurking behind'" (DELEUZE, "Preface" Iv). In a similar fashion, in "The Exhausted," a ground-breaking essay included in the same collection, he divides Beckett's *oeuvre* into three phases of exposing this hidden instance. *Embers* belongs to the middle one, orientated towards the "language of voices" (DELEUZE, "The Exhausted" 157–158). This language is more exhausted than the language of Beckett's early novels, but at the same time it is still governed by perceptible logic, contrary to the late, abyssal "language of spaces" (156–157, 160). Moreover, the heroes constructed in this period in order to speak the second language are also



subjected to the on-going exhaustion affecting their feeble bodies and tortured *cogito* (157–160). For Deleuze, the eponymous category is a means to enter the non-linguistic and material space, which becomes accessible precisely through puncturing the linguistic.

If one takes a closer look at Addie's relation to Henry, he or she will inevitably observe how she exhausts the paternal function, in the Deleuzian sense of this word. When Henry speaks about Addie for the very first time, he is struck by her disobedience to his own order. It is through the following two scenes that this exhaustion resurfaces. In the further part of *Embers*, Addie is recalled twice. Henry summarises one of these situations: "It was not enough to drag her into the world, now she must play the piano" (259). Addie asks her Music Master, a blatant father figure, if she can play "her piece" (258). He agrees by beating the correct rhythm with a ruler on the piano case. When Addie makes an error, Music Master brutally hits the case with his phallic item and shrieks "Fa!," scolding the "F" sound which has been played instead of "E." During the second take, Addie repeats her mistake. Subsequently, Music Master becomes furious, while his "Fa!" and "Eff!" merge with Addie's wailing and piano chords into the "amplified paroxysm" of the chaotic sound collage (259). During the second scene, Addie is learning horse riding with her Riding Master. However, instead of providing her with technical instructions, he repetitively corrects her posture. It is implied that she constantly makes mistakes; eventually, the scene is concluded with the already recognisable recording of paroxysm.

Contrary to the masters' expectations, Addie resists their orders in the same manner she has previously resisted Henry's ones. When she insists on playing "her piece," it is the teacher who violently imposes the rhythmic pattern on her. After she hits the wrong chord, Music Master reacts with the atavist "Fa" and "Eff," which bring us back to the father figure. While rhythm – due to the prenatal connection to the womb, mother's pulses and heartbeat – remains maternal<sup>6</sup>, the teacher strives for stifling it, and deteriorating it to such a form that can be organised and reflected in the pattern. A similar case occurs in the Riding Master episode; precisely, he is not interested in the actual abilities or skills, but rather he focuses on the visual aspect of horse riding, whose irrelevancy is exaggerated through the usage of the broadcasting medium. Furthermore, Addie directly opposes him with the reluctance to correct her posture, figurating the scene that cannot be rendered in the solely audial convention of *Embers*. Ultimately, she exhausts the paternal functions of not only both teachers (in the first case by returning to the pre-symbolic arrhythmia, and in the second – by the visual representation, both of which cannot be simply translated into the linguistic register of the father: the dominant medium of Beckett's play), but also

<sup>6</sup> This connotation, recurring in continental philosophy, is theorised among others by Julia KRISTEVA.

Henry himself. It is worth noting that the shrieks, sounds and wailings compiled and looped as the paroxysmal collage evoke the only non-linguistic sounds that do not rely solely on Henry's decision.

### “White World, Not a Sound”

Both Addie and Ada, whose names play on the quasi-anagrams of words “daddy” and “dad” respectively, tear Henry's fixed position, instead of guaranteeing the expansion and appropriation of the paternal authority. Ada, as it has been demonstrated, is an incarnation of Henry's desire of being present as a physical being, or – following Robbe-Grillet's imagery – desire of (self-) creation. It is through the forced sexual intercourse that they become separated, since born Addie quickly turns out to be beyond his control. Furthermore, Henry attempts to wipe Ada out of his memory, and even though she eventually leaves him, her very presence has already inscribed the corporeal difference between their bodies in the reality of *Embers*: while we can hear Henry's body, even though its existence is appropriated and mediated through the immaterial and arbitrary sounds, Ada's body – for instance during sitting – exists only in the written text and recited lines. We are told what she is doing, rather than we hear it. Despite following and interacting with Henry, Ada does not do what he expects from her, not only weakening his story-creating supremacy, but also disposing his language of the power over matter. Consequently, he must call the apocalyptic hooves, which, however, cannot but re-play what has already been recorded on the reel, even though they regain his privileged position. In other words, Henry's linguistic authority is in the process of fading due to the ongoing struggle with the different types of materiality and physicality he tries to name and make familiar.

Addie represents a different figure; as she constantly avoids paternal demands and expectations, her presence is manifested through the paroxysmal collage – the set of sounds not directly requested by Henry. If Ada is the figure of language without the suitable presence, then Addie reaches her presence outside of language, or on its edges. Even the very scenes with her are pasted into *Embers* as the audial flashbacks mediated by Henry (as the radio operator); they exclude his company. Moreover, Addie is the only person perplexed by her father's constant talking. When Ada tells that to Henry, the infuriated father tells Ada that she was supposed to tell little Addie that he is “praying” (260). Instead of explicating it directly to his daughter, Henry stages a situation in which he also has to be treated as a transcendent figure immersed in his secluded activity: activity which is claimed to establish the direct connection to the divine

instance of authority. Finally, every time Addie's father or one of the teachers (presumably, hired by Henry himself) imposes expectations, orders, demands or categorisations on her – that is, attempts to mitigate her and enforce her passivity – she punctures those aims.

If Ada is staged through the lack of sound and Addie – through its excess, then what becomes disturbing is the fact that the reminiscence of the intercourse, implied to be the moment of conceiving Addie, is interrupted by the roaring sea. Moreover, when the sea distracts and threatens Henry throughout the radio play, it remains the horizon at which he is persistently staring for hours. Emphatically, for Ada the sound of the very same sea happens to be pleasing and soothing; it functions as a *sui generis* shelter in the audial reality of *Embers*. In his opening monologue, Henry states:

Henry: [...] The sound you hear is the sea. [*Pause. Louder.*] I said that the sound you hear is the sea, we are sitting on the strand. [*Pause.*] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn't see what it was you wouldn't know what it was.

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Interestingly enough, Henry is not explaining to the listener what he is encountering, but rather makes the uncanny and haunting noise familiar. After all, Henry claims that he *sees* what the sea actually is, putting himself in the privileged position of describing the reality. Yet, since the landscape of *Embers* is entirely audial, one should seek another explanation. In fact, bearing in mind that for Ada its sound remains soothing, while for Henry – hostile, one may claim that the sea finds a degree of resemblance with the discontinuity inscribed in the female figure. Consequently, it may be what Simon Critchley calls the "tinnitus of existence" (CRITCHLEY xxv): the "background noise" that forbids the ultimate closing up of the paternal function, simultaneously fuelling its own process of impossible translation into the familiar and nameable notions.

"White world. Not a sound" (*passim*) – the recurring chorus of *Embers* – marks the impossibility of the father figure lying in its very core. The white noise as the originary "not-a-sound" of the empty reel becomes filled with Henry's narration. As a result, the white world indeed demands filling, yet at the same time it cannot be entirely disposed of its white space in which the sounds resonate. Since it cannot be fully tamed by Henry, its uncanny voice dismantling his stories returns materialised as soundless Ada and Addie, who is in turn abundant with sounds. None of these figures functions as a solution; Henry's father figure cannot fully master them neither as a character of the plot nor as an operator of the very medium. Beckett's re-thinking of the father's authority repetitively entails the process of wearing him out and producing meaningless remnants. For Beckett, the father becomes the most suitable metaphor for the utopia of the fixed I. No matter whether this is the material subject controlling the matter (as it has

been demonstrated through Ada), the sovereign, cultural subject (manifested in Henry's relation to Addie), or the subject aptly translating the contingent thoughts to accurate words (example of the sea), it is already predestined to fail and produce a residue: a residue balancing between the de-materialisation of "I" through "not I" and the materialisation of the paternal violence.

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## Bio-Bibliographical Note

Michał Kisiel is a PhD student at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He holds an MA degree in English Studies. His dissertation focused on the categories of subject and undecidability in Alain Badiou, Jacques Derrida and Samuel Beckett. Currently, he is working on the thesis devoted to the thesis devoted to the unfolding of Samuel Beckett and Tadeusz Kantor by means of new materialist method. Aside from that, his interests include the correspondence between literature and philosophy, and the ontological turn in humanities. In 2015, he participated in the Northwestern University Paris Program in Critical Theory.